

**Senate Select Committee on Prison Safety
Tuesday, October 22, 2019 at 11:00 AM
Room 643 of the Legislative Office Building**

MINUTES

The Senate Select Committee on Prison Safety met at 11:00 AM on October 22, 2019 in Room 643 of the Legislative Office Building. The following Senators were present: Chairman Bob Steinburg, Senators Danny Britt, Jim Burgin, Warren Daniel, Kathy Harrington, Ralph Hise, Tom McInnis, Floyd McKissick, Harper Peterson, Terry Van Duyn, and Joyce Waddell.

Senator Bob Steinburg presided, and acknowledged the Sergeants At Arms Dwight Green, Charles Marsalis, Sheree Hedrick, and Chris Moore.

Senator Steinburg called on Commissioner of Adult Corrections Todd Ishee to present the “Prison Safety and Wellness Plan.” The full presentation can be seen on the committee website, under the documents for October 22, 2019.

The sections of the presentation included, but not limited to:

- Correctional Officer Vacancy Rate
- Security Coverage and Overtime
- NC Prison Population at the Fiscal Year End
- Problems Related to Officer Retention
- Prison Safety and Employee Wellness Plan in Phases
- Prisons Selected to Suspend Operations
- Short Term Benefits
- Long Term Organizational Recruitment and Retention Strategies

Commissioner Ishee stated that the number of assaults is disturbingly high, and not all of the assaults in 2019 have been published yet.

Senator Steinburg opened the floor for discussion, after announcing that Senate Bill 579, the Prison Reform Act of 2019, has come back from the House of Representatives.

Senator Hise asked about the closings taking place in minimum custody facilities, and transferring the officers and other staff to close custody. Particularly, why were the western facilities not closing, but the ones in the Central and Eastern region more affected? Commissioner Ishee stated that the staffing issues in the west were not as pronounced as they were at some facilities such as Bertie and Pasquotank. Senator Hise followed up by asking about the levels of security. Commissioner Ishee stated that beds in the close custody prisons were at a premium, given the level of violence among offenders.

Senator McKissick asked Commissioner Ishee what he saw as a realistic strategy for closing the 1800 officer gap and doing so expeditiously. Commissioner Ishee stated that closing the three prisons was a last resort. Mr. Ishee further stated that the retention STEP pay plan referenced by both himself and Chairman Steinburg would help alleviate, but that there are also other steps that

would need to be taken. Senator McKissick followed up by asking how many inmates were moved as a result of closures, and how does this impact of the inmates that are being moved. Commissioner Ishee stated that it negatively affects the offenders, but that the overriding principle was the safety and well-being of the staff.

Senator Waddell asking about the vacancy rate, about the process for training, and the process for recruiting. Commissioner Ishee stated that there are eight active recruiters across the state that are attending hundreds of hiring events per year. The root of the problem is retention, with a large number of people deciding the corrections is not for them. Senator Waddell followed up by asking retirement where many officers are close to retirement eligibility. Commissioner Ishee stated that the strategic plan is to grow and strengthen the bench. It has not been as big a focus as otherwise would have been since the agency is still focusing on healing from the tragedies of 2017.

Senator Steinburg spoke to Senator Waddell's question, stating that the biggest area where there are so many people close to retirement, which is largely in the leadership of the correctional facilities.

Senator Burgin asked what the proportion of male to female officers were. Commissioner Ishee estimated that 60% of the new hires were female. By way of permission from Senator Steinburg, Commissioner Ishee called upon Tracy Little from the Division of Prison to expand on that breakdown. Ms. Little stated that the current breakdown of officers is 65-35% male. She stated that estimates that Commissioner Ishee gave was accurate. Senator Burgin followed up by asking about the plan to move to eight hour shifts from the current structure. Commissioner Ishee stated that all options are on the table including a hybrid of eight and twelve hour structures, based on the need. Senator Burgin stated that he felt that the stress factor could largely be alleviated by going to an eight hour structure given that the officers are now, more often than not, having to work longer than twelve hours in one stating.

Senator Van Duyn asked Commissioner Ishee to quantify what the size of the investment would be to address the issues that the system presently faces. Commissioner Ishee stated that the agency is looking at several models, and that the investment from the General Assembly would need to be significant, with estimates of \$30 to \$40 million in the first year. As things phase in, the cost would go down because of costs associated with current shortages would disappear. Commissioner Ishee offered to furnish ideas that have been worked on. Senator Van Duyn followed up by asking about the closure of minimum security prisons, and if there is a likelihood of the prisons reopening. Commissioner Ishee stated that the agency will review the need every six months and the possibility of resuming operations.

Senator Peterson asked if there is an emergency plan in place since he sees the system is in a genuine state of emergency. Commissioner Ishee stated that the agency is trying to get to the root of the problem with the long term solutions in view. Senator Steinburg mentioned Senate Bill 579 to ascertain what the costs would be to begin making improvements such as removing Corrections from the Department of Public Safety and a STEP Pay Plan.

Senator Steinburg called on members of the public to speak.

Ms. Artis Watkins, from the State Employees Association of North Carolina, stated that all of the prison staff are in danger on a day by day basis. She stated that while the staff is appreciative of what the department is trying to do, closing the three prisons will make the problems worse. Since 2009, North Carolina has closed 25 prisons to date. She has stated that more inmates are put into one facility, the more problems there are going to be. She also stated that something needs to be done right now, and closing more prisons will not solve anything.

Senator Steinburg stated that he has discovered that those who work in the prison system come into contact with some very violent people, and further stated that what is done to fix the prison system must encompass all employees, pointing out that the victims at Pasquotank were not just correctional officers, but also included people in the sewing plant and the maintenance department.

Senator McInnis moved the approval of the minutes from June 10. Senator Britt seconded the motion, which carried.

There being no further business before the committee, the Senate Select Committee on Prison Safety adjourned.

The meeting adjourned at 11:59 a.m.

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Senator Bob Steinburg, Chairman
Presiding

Edward Stiles, Committee Clerk